

8-3-2018

Daily Artefact: a record of making and maker

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Daily Artefact: a record of making and maker

by

Aprille Nace

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics

School for American Crafts

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY

August 3, 2018

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Abstract

Reacting to the inherent qualities of clay this thesis is an exploration into how mass, color, expressionistic textures, quiet neutral planes, and the materiality of clay can embody extreme contradiction and tension in abstract ceramic sculpture. The body of work begins as a massive blank canvas awaiting my response of the moment. Each form is acted upon differently but holds in common a stretching of the expressivist potential of clay. This exploration is driven by my struggles with the extreme highs and lows of bipolar disorder.

That was the premise of my thesis before I began working on it. As the work took shape, it became apparent that it was an exploration in surface, specifically in color. This exploration took me through techniques of manipulating color that ranged from saturating porcelain with ceramic stains to layering wet clay with wet glaze and handfuls of stains and then stretching the clay to create new fields of color. Having set strict parameters for myself (working only in sculptural cylinders and building each object within one working day) to create a constant among the many variables of color. These parameters became more important as the work continued to evolve.

Here the work became an artifact of time - a record of making and maker. This thesis is a record of that evolution.

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Fig. 2. Hofmann, Hans. *Sommernachtstraum*, 1958. Oil on canvas. 52 x 60 inches. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr. Source: Albright-Knox. Home. <http://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/k19584-sommernachtstraum>. Accessed April 24, 2018. With permission of the Renate, Hans & Maria Hofmann Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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Fig. 7. Nagle, Ron, *Handsome Drifter*. 2015. Ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, and epoxy resin, 3 ¾ x 4 x 3 inches, 10 x 10 x 8cm. © Ron Nagle, Courtesy Mathew Marks Gallery. Source: Ron Nagle-Work-2015, Digital Image. Source: <http://ronnagle.net/2015/handsome-drifter-2015mixed-media-3-75-x-4-x-3-in/>. Accessed April 12, 2018. Used with permission of the artist.

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Various dimension

Introduction

Original thesis statement

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the potential of mass, scale, and surface to capture the unique materiality of clay; and if it can be manipulated to express tension and extremes in abstract ceramic sculpture. It is to explore creating sculpture that is able to foster a visual relationship with the view to experience the values of mass, scale, and surface through the lens of extremes.

Additional Statements

The basic premise of this work began with an introspective look at living with bipolar disorder and a desire to capture the visceral nature of extreme mood swings in clay. However, in developing the original thesis, it became apparent that while abstract sculpture can be expressive conveying such a focused subject would be difficult, without much explanation. Therefore, the overarching objective became how to use the materiality of clay to convey the idea of contrasting extremes by focusing on three of its inherent characteristics (Mass, Surface, and Scale.) While living with bipolar disorder became the background inspiration.

Section I: Context

In 2005 I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder 1. In the intervening years, my illness stabilized as much as possible through a regimen of psychiatrists, therapists, self-reflection, and medication. Despite all these efforts, I am still left with regular and frequent mood swings, though not as intense as they were before treatment. I have always expressed myself creatively, first through dance, then writing, and finally through visual arts. Finding myself in graduate school for ceramics, I turned from an interest in the functional to the sculptural, looking for a way to express, to explain, what it feels like to live with controlled chaos and uncertainty—though I didn't realize that was what was going on at the time. At that moment I was reeling from a very personal loss and through grief closed myself off from the world which was reflected in the dense and guarded work I was making. Despite this state of mind flashes of color were able to break through as evidence that something more was going on beneath the surface. These flashes of color bring me back to my earliest exposure to visual arts. My first memories of an artist are of my uncle, Albert Kresch, a New York School painter, and the brilliant colors and textures of his landscapes.



Fig. 1 Kresch, Albert. *Yellow Landscape*, undated. Oil on canvas. Dimensions unknown. ©Albert Kresch. Source: <http://www.newyorkartworld.com/reviews-nyaw/rev-kresch.html>. Accessed April 24, 2018. Used with permission of the artist.

Outside of the family my first real interaction with Art with a capital A was a trip to the Albright-Knox gallery in the fourth grade and the freedom I saw in the symphony of color of the Abstract Expressionists. In particular, it was Hans Hofmann's *Sommernachtstraum* and Jackson Pollock's *Convergence* that stuck with me. I found myself wanting to experience the freedom their use of color made me feel.

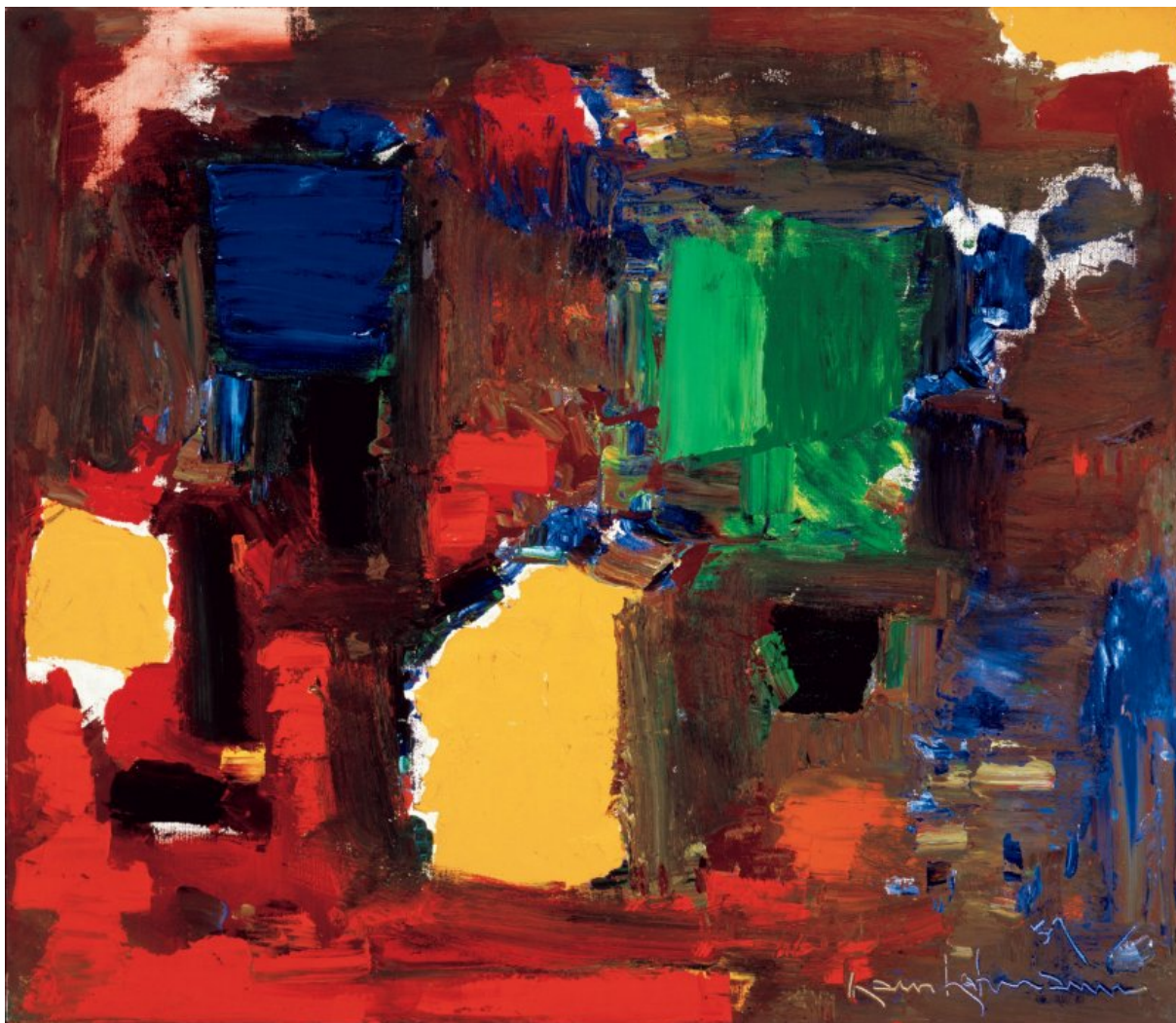


Fig. 2. Hofmann, Hans. *Sommernachtstraum*, 1958. Oil on canvas. 52 x 60 inches. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr. Source: Albright-Knox. Home. Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://www.albrightknox.org/artworks/k19584-sommernachtstraum>. With permission of the Renate, Hans & Maria Hofmann Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



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Fast-forward to today, and I find myself drawn to contemporary artists who have a strong sense of color in their work artists such as Lauren Mabry, Toots Zynsky, David Maisel, and Ron Nagle all informed my work. Now, I find the exploration of color critical to my work.



Fig. 4. Mabry, Lauren, *Cylinder*. 2012. Red earthenware, slips, glaze, china paint enamel, 10 x 12 x 12 inches. Source: Lauren Mabry-Art-Cylinders, <http://laurenmabry.com/cylinders#/cylinder-1-1-1-2-1/> (accessed April 12, 2018). Used with permission of the artist.



Fig. 5 Zynsky, Toots. *Soleggiata Serena*, 2000. Glass. 11 x 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 inches. Collection of Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Source: *ArtStor*. Accessed April 12, 2018. http://library.artstor.org/asset/AMBOSTONIG_10313625638. Gift of the artist in honor of Evelyn and John Zynsky.

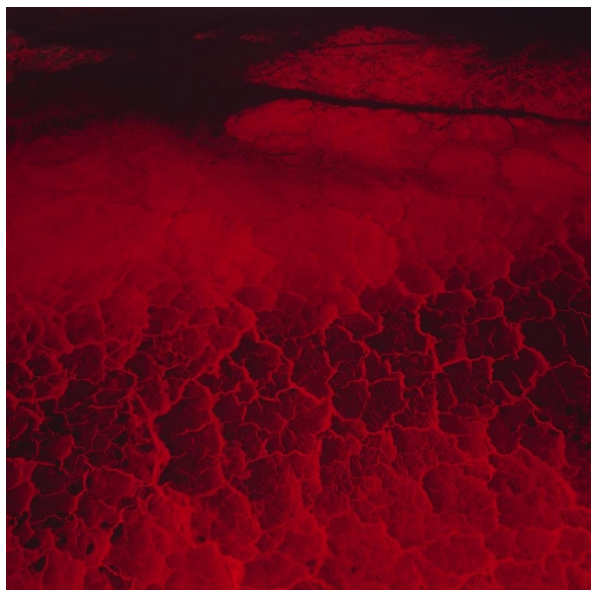


Fig. 6. Maisel, David. *The Lake Project 2*, 2001. Archival pigment print 48 x 48 inches, © David Maisel. Source: "David Maisel." Mark Moore Fine Art - David Maisel. Accessed April 12, 2018. <http://www.markmoorefineart.com/artists/david-maisel>. Used with permission of the artist.



Fig. 7. Nagle, Ron, *Handsome Drifter*. 2015. Ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, and epoxy resin, 3 3/4 x 4 x 3 inches, 10 x 10 x 8cm. © Ron Nagle, Courtesy Mathew Marks Gallery. Source: Ron Nagle-Work-2015, Digital Image. Source: <http://ronnagle.net/2015/handsome-drifter-2015mixed-media-3-75-x-4-x-3-in/> (accessed April 12, 2018). Used with permission of the artist.

Section II: Evolution

In looking at my original thesis statement, it has little to do with what my work has become. As self-created walls have given way so has the heavy, dense, wheel-based work I previously made. Instead, making has become an intimate process. An exploration of color, surface, and medium. The new work is airy, light, and colorful. The only constant is the sculptural cylinder and that the work is wholly assembled in one day. It has been less of an evolution than a blind leap into unknown layers of color. There was little work between the two worlds, a few clunky objects that spoke little to me led to a few objects of textured porcelain, overfiring them created a rich self-glazed surface triggering a complete move to porcelain. Not just porcelain but the whitest porcelain I could make, a perfect blank canvas. A cylinder that was accidentally made pink by errant red Mason stain and then surprisingly collapsed into a compelling, crumpled form spawned a new world of ideas and possibilities.



Fig. 8. Nace, Aprille, December 4, 2017. Porcelain, stain, glaze. 16" x 12" x 13"

With those results, I began to explore new ways of coloring clay that ranged from the traditional mixing of stain into wet clay, to layering wet clay with wet glaze to saturating the surface with stain to create brilliant fields of color. It was the layering of wet glaze that was most revelatory as the stretching, pulling, and rolling of clay that had been layered with wet glaze and scattered with handfuls of mason stain created surfaces that reminded me of the freedom I felt with seeing the work of the Abstract Expressionists. It was these discoveries in color that motivated me and pushed me to push the work. The self-imposed parameter to complete assembly in one day pushed me to continue making new work on a schedule paced to keep me moving forward.

Beyond researching color through the works of the artists previously mentioned, I turned to the text *Abstract Painting, the elements of visual language* (Davies 2017) to gain a deeper understanding because I had limited formal knowledge of visual language. This book was vitally helpful in my gaining a better understanding of the formal language of color and led me to think about influences on my color selection and combinations beyond, ‘I don’t know’ and ‘because I like it.’ Also, I studied many texts on both Modernist and Abstract Expressionist painters to soak up what their work expressed about color. I realized that most of my color choices have more to do with external, and internal, forces than a thought out plan for color selection and combination. For example, music is a strong influence in my life, and I often listen to music in the studio – the style of music reflecting my mood at the time. While on a binge of late night listening to the ethereal Cocteau Twins I started to become interested in creating a sort of landscape of pillowy color, a departure from what I had been working on in the previous weeks. As a result, I explored watercolors and the kind of dreamscape I could create with them. I also looked at the colors used by Nicole Chesney (<https://nicolechesney.com>) in the ephemeral surfaces she creates on glass mirrors. The result is *April 3, 2018* (see figures 20.1 & 20.2), that features a glimpse into a dreamy interior colorscape and white exterior with color seeping out on crack and seam lines.



Fig. 9. Chesney, Nicole. Study for Lucet, 2017. Oil on acid-etched and mirrored glass. 20 x 24 x 1 inches. Used with permission of the artist.

Another important text for me is “10 Rules for Students, Teachers, and Life”¹ (1967-1968) authored by Sister Corita Kent. This text had a significant impact on the way I think about making and the evolution of the work. These rules are a pointed list of the responsibilities of the teacher and the student in the process of making art. The rules remind one that everything is an experiment, not to critique while making, and that you should enjoy yourself. Lessons I was told, but that didn’t sink in until I posted them in my studio and read them every day. As the work evolved so did I, we moved together from behind a thick manufactured wall out into freeing fields of color. The practice became more about the making than about the maker.

¹ See Appendix

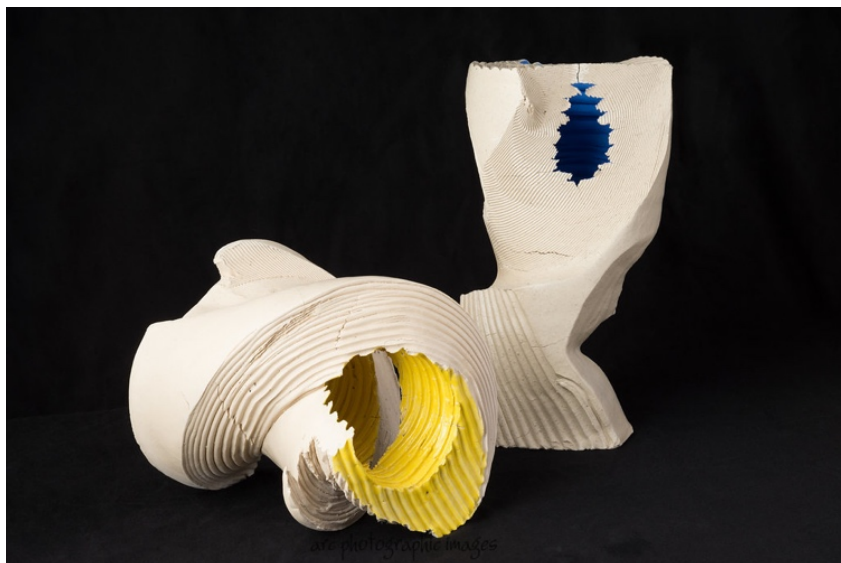


Fig. 10. Nace, Aprille. Untitled. White stoneware, glaze. A. 7 x 11 inches. B. 14.5 x 8 inches.



Fig. 11. Nace, Aprille. March 3, 2018- detail. Porcelain, stains, metallic acrylic paint.

Section III: The Body of Work

If I were to go by the original premise of this thesis, I would say that the work is not resolved. What I would say instead is that the thesis objectives and the work have transformed into something much more meaningful. Instead, the work is about capturing time; capturing process; and capturing making.

As stated previously, every object is built in a day's time. It is also fired the day it is created. The object is then an artifact of the interplay between myself and the clay on that day. It is also about process. From the process of pounding down and rolling out slabs to the chaos of layering and manipulating dry stains and wet glazes with wet clay to the careful cutting and joining of strips, there is an intimate interaction between myself and the clay: a record of hand craft and awareness of self. The objective is found in creating a record of the making and the maker. In keeping with this idea, each work is titled with the date it was built.

If the work has any connection to the original thesis, it is to the investigation of Surface. It is in the surface study that the work is most complete. The transformative exploration of the application and incorporation of color to create new fields of color resulted in work that feels resolved in its quest. Feeling this investigation was reaching a safe place I began to limit myself to the use of one color to focus on form. The form used is a previously mentioned sculptural cylinder. The cylinder is then over-fired, pushing the clay past its comfort level to the brink of – and sometimes total – collapse. These single color objects are not as successful as those that center around creating fields of color. The objects, ordered here by date made, are a record of the successful and the not so successful.



Fig. 12. Nace, Aprille, February 3, 2018. Porcelain, stains, glaze. 15 x 13 x 3.5 inches.
This pile of collapsed tabs of clay represent a full day of making. They clearly convey an Oh-No! moment in the life of an artist when viewed in context of other work, particularly February 23, 2018. The object is a successful failure.



Fig.13.1. Nace, Aprile, February 23, 2018. Porcelain, stains, glaze. 12 x 10 x 18 inches. This work is unsuccessful in its overall use of color. The transitions are too abrupt.



Fig.13.2. Nace, Aprille, February 23, 2018-detail. Porcelain, stains, glaze.
In this detail the surface success of this object is evident. The blue-black swirling and crackled color creates a compelling surface.



Fig. 14.1. Nace, Aprille, *February 28, 2018*. Porcelain, stains, glaze, bronze paint. 9 x 10.5 x 20 inches. This object illustrates both the use of layered color and overfiring of the clay to bring about a hint of instability. The blue highlights allude to the interior.



Fig. 14.2. Nace, Aprille, *February 28, 2018*-detail. Porcelain, stains, glaze, bronze paint. The contrasting interior of this object with its subtle changes in the field of color, is its most successful aspect.



Fig. 15.1 Nace, Aprille, March 3, 2018. A. 5 x 7 inches.
B. 14 x 12 x 13 inches. C. Not pictured. 11 x 13.5 inches. Porcelain, stains, metallic acrylic paint.



Fig. 15.2 Nace, Aprille, March 3, 2018. B. 14" x 12" * 13". Porcelain, stains, metallic acrylic paint. With this piece the investigation of color feels fully resolved with both the interior and exterior surfaces. The bright orange and dark green highlights feel particularly successful.



Fig. 16. Nace, Aprille, *March 22, 2018*. Porcelain, glaze. 16 x 12 x 14 inches. This object is the first departure from color in this body of work. The surface markings are tentative and unrealized. The pattern formed in the interior is far more compelling.



Fig. 17. Nace, Aprille. *March 23*, 2018. Porcelain. 22 x 13 inches.

In contrast with the preceding object the surface markings are successful in this precarious stack of rings. There is also a sense of time in the markings.

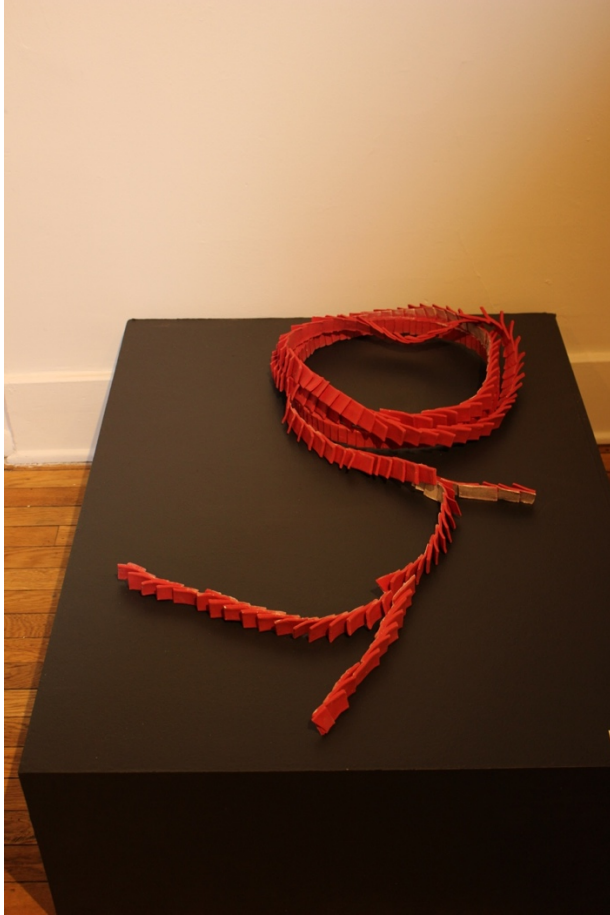


Fig. 18. Nace, Aprille. *March 26, 2018*. Porcelain, stain, wax paste lustre. 2 x 22 x 49 inches. Meant to be both a study in red and a variation in height this object is unsuccessful in both aspects. The color is flat and uninteresting and form itself is unremarkable.



Fig. 19. Nace, Aprille. *March 28, 2018*. Porcelain, stain, lacquer paint. 9 x 26 x 34 inches



Fig. 20.1 & 20.2. Nace, Aprille. *April 3*, 2018. Porcelain, watercolor paints. 20 x 12 inches.
 A way to focus on form and still bring in color, the interior of this form is dreamscape of color only hinted at on the exterior through the spyhole. It is more playful and relaxed than the other objects. This is the only object to actively engage the view and feels like a direction that needs more exploration.

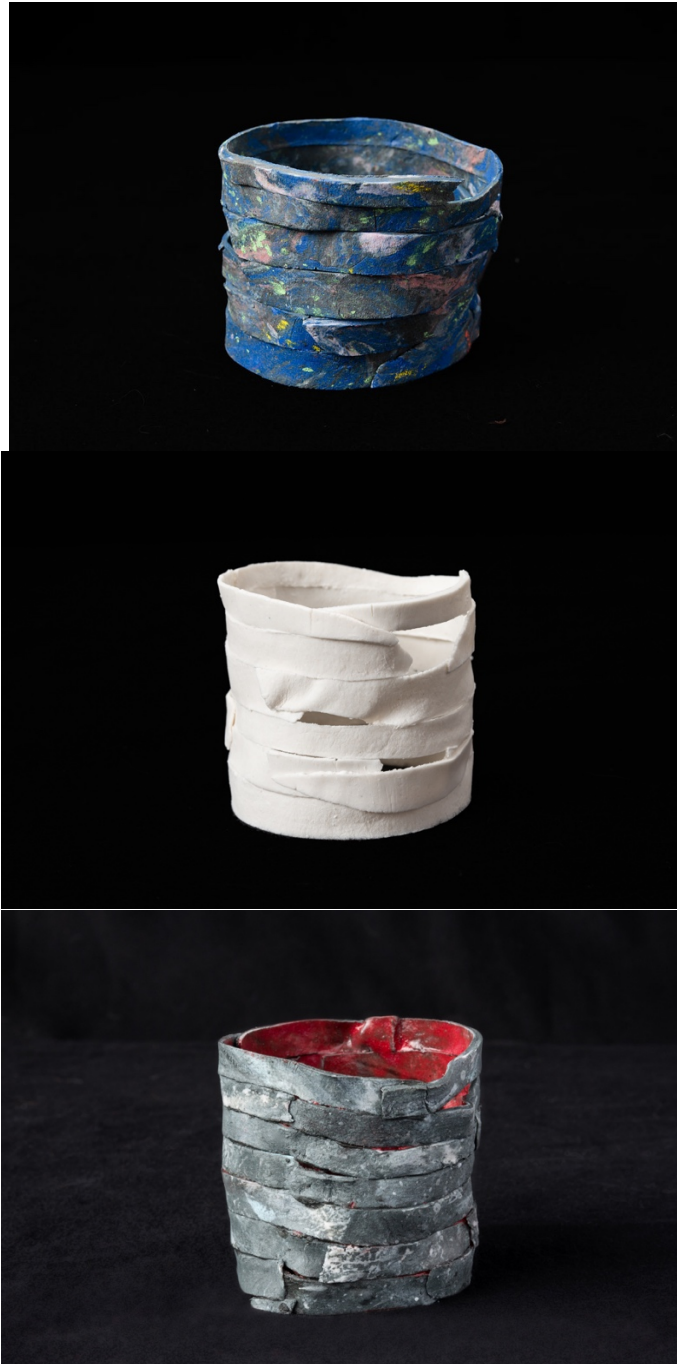


Fig. 21. Nace, Aprille. (March 2018, various dates). Porcelain, stains, slips, glaze. Various dimensions. These scaled down works feature all the detail of the larger works. Some took as long as four hours to complete. These objects were in some cases more difficult to make because of their size. They required a great level of craftsmanship than the larger counterparts. The black exterior red glaze interior objects are the most compelling of the group. While the white 'hurricane' has the highest level of craftsmanship.

Conclusion

In the end, this investigation is about color, about making, and about the maker. It is an evolution. The body of work created reflects this with varying success and behind it is the series of failures it took to get here. It is most successful where colors have been layered. Monotone colors are less successful and are uninteresting and flat. Attempts to create interest after firing are somewhat successful in one piece and not at all in the other. It wasn't until the objects were laid out in the gallery that this became glaringly apparent. The use of uncolored porcelain also had varying success, and ultimately color worked its way back into the work. The work was often of similar size, and upright it was an obvious problem in creating a dynamic exhibition layout.

Where the work was most successful was in what is not visible. It was the transformation from a premise that was largely self-involved to real interaction with the work that is self-aware. Ultimately, the work may contain color, or not, it may have a manipulated surface, or not, it may be upright, or not. Regardless it is a record of making and maker.

Looking forward, I would like to push harder in the use of color and to continue to play with new ways of imparting and layering color in my work. Also, I plan to incorporate more variety of size, at first pursuing mini-cylinders to develop a better hand at craft. Eventually, I plan to experiment with forms beyond the cylinder, but that feels like it is in the distance. There is more exploration needed first. I'd also like to push what can be created in a day. Ultimately these are all just ideas, and they will change and evolve as the work evolves.

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Appendix

Rules for Students, Teachers, and Life (1967-1968)

By Sister Corita Kent

RULE ONE: Find a place you trust, and then try trusting it for awhile.

RULE TWO: General duties of a student — pull everything out of your teacher; pull everything out of your fellow students.

RULE THREE: General duties of a teacher — pull everything out of your students.

RULE FOUR: Consider everything an experiment.

RULE FIVE: Be self-disciplined — this means finding someone wise or smart and choosing to follow them. To be disciplined is to follow in a good way. To be self-disciplined is to follow in a better way.

RULE SIX: Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail, there's only make.

RULE SEVEN: The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It's the people who do all of the work all of the time who eventually catch on to things.

RULE EIGHT: Don't try to create and analyze at the same time. They're different processes.

RULE NINE: Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It's lighter than you think.

RULE TEN: "We're breaking all the rules. Even our own rules. And how do we do that? By leaving plenty of room for X quantities." (John Cage)